

California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System
California Department of Fish and Wildlife
California Interagency Wildlife Task Group

WHITE-TAILED KITE

Elanus leucurus

Family: ACCIPITRIDAE

Order: FALCONIFORMES

Class: AVES

B111

Written by: C. Polite

Reviewed by: S. Bailey

Edited by: S. Bailey, P. Bloom

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

Common to uncommon, yearlong resident in coastal and valley lowlands; rarely found away from agricultural areas. Inhabits herbaceous and open stages of most habitats mostly in cismontane California. Has extended range and increased numbers in recent decades.

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Preys mostly on voles and other small, diurnal mammals, occasionally on birds, insects, reptiles, and amphibians. Forages in undisturbed, open grasslands, meadows, farmlands and emergent wetlands. Soars, glides, and hovers less than 30 m (100 ft) above ground in search of prey. Slowly descends vertically upon prey with wings held high, and legs extended; rarely dives into tall cover (Thompson 1975).

Cover: Uses trees with dense canopies for cover. In southern California, also roosts in saltgrass and Bermudagrass.

Reproduction: Makes a nest of loosely piled sticks and twigs and lined with grass, straw, or rootlets. Nest placed near top of dense oak, willow, or other tree stand; usually 6-20 m (20-100 ft) above ground (Dixon et al. 1957). Nest located near open foraging area.

Water: Probably meets water requirements from prey.

Pattern: Uses herbaceous lowlands with variable tree growth and dense population of voles (Waian and Stendell 1970). Substantial groves of dense, broad-leaved deciduous trees used for nesting and roosting.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong diurnal, and crepuscular activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Apparently not migratory, but Binford (1979) found some movements in coastal California. May become nomadic in response to prey abundance (Dunk and Cooper 1994).

Home Range: Forages from a central perch over areas as large as 3 sq km (1.9 sq mi) Warner and Rudd 1975). Seldom hunts more than 0.8 km (0.5 mi) from nest when breeding (Hawbecker 1942). Henry (1983) found mean breeding home range to be 0.57 sq km (0.2 mi).

Territory: Generally not territorial, but nest site may be defended against crows, other hawks, and eagles (Pickwell 1930, Dixon et al. 1957). Defended foraging territories of about 0.10 sq km (.04 sq mi) in winter from red-tailed hawks and northern harriers (Bammann 1975).

Communal roost used in nonbreeding seasons (Waian and Stendell 1970). Territory size a function of prey and competitor abundance (Dunk and Cooper 1994).

Reproduction: Monogamous; breeds from February to October, with peak from May to August. Average clutch 4-5 eggs, range 3-6. Female only incubates, for about 28 days. Young fledge in 35-40 days. During incubation and nestling period, male feeds female, and supplies her with food to feed the young. Usually single brooded; occasionally 2 broods.

Niche: Preys on rodents that may be harmful to agricultural crops. Nest may be robbed by jays, crows yellow-billed magpies, raccoons, and opossums. Great horned owls may prey on adults and young.

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